

The Great Decline

Why Australian Education Standards are Plummeting Fast

by Melbourne-based special education teacher Jen Deyzel

About this document:

It is available for publication in Australian newspapers and associated websites. It may be published in full - or in part provided a link to the original is published.

The link is: <https://goo.gl/HaNPPh>

About Jen Deyzel:

Jen is a septuagenarian teacher with more than fifty years experience. She has spent years working with students with learning problems and those who have not learnt through the current methods of teaching. Jen is currently running a private practice assisting students in language and mathematics.

She has taught in government and private primary schools in several countries, as well as a special education school. She has been a curriculum coordinator and has taught thousands of children to read, many with dyslexia and other related problems. She has also taught gifted students and run 'gifted' programs leading to 66 students winning scholarships.

She is constantly confronted with students lacking basic skills in language and mathematics and worries how students will thrive, or even survive in an increasingly complex and demanding world. She worries even more about the many students who are struggling and to whom tutoring is not available. This document has been written in the hope that the decline in education can be halted, her concerns addressed and changes implemented that will benefit all students. She is a member of LDA - Learning Difficulties Australia.

ABSTRACT

The school education system in Australia is in decline.

The current international assessment results, (late 2016), have sent alarm bells ringing throughout the country. 'The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' (TIMSS) shows that our grade four maths students are now 27th out of the 49 countries that took part in the study. PISA, the OECD Programme for International Assessment, showed a significant decline in the reading, maths and science performance of our secondary school students. Scores in maths have fallen four cycles in a row. The fall has been across all three schooling sectors - government, independent and Catholic. Our own NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy) report indicated that the academic performance of our primary and secondary students had flat-lined. The Year 9 writing skills were worse than in 2011. Western Australia and Queensland results, however, showed some improvement.

Despite many caring teachers, our education is failing, particularly in the primary schools, which are the foundation for the senior schools and universities.

1. The Whole Language approach has been used instead of a phonics based program. This has resulted in 30% of our children not being able to decode words efficiently and thus read effectively at the appropriate level.
2. The philosophy of constructivism has taken hold. Teachers no longer teach. They now facilitate children's learning. Clearly the decline in our results indicates that the learning is not taking place. The students are not reaching the required standard.
3. The self-esteem movement has developed. Children may not be told that they are wrong. Everything they do is praised whether deserved or not.
4. The reporting system is corrupt. The truth is frequently not told, as it may (supposedly!) damage the child's self-esteem. Parents are frequently unaware that their child is experiencing problems in learning at school.
5. The universities have promoted whole language and constructivism. The student teachers have been imbued with these ideas and have not been given the opportunity to explore other teaching methods. Many students have not been taught the necessary skill sets to undertake the effective teaching of reading, writing and mathematics in

the schools. Furthermore, the students at university have gained their knowledge through the constructivist approach - a method that doesn't work very well!

6. In fact many of these student teachers themselves started their university courses without the requisite reading, writing and mathematics skills, because an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) of 50 was enough to have them accepted into the teaching faculty at a university. Teaching has had the lowest intake score of any course at our universities. The government is, however, making a start at addressing this issue. Various universities are now setting limits such as ATAR scores of 65,75,80. This is a big step forward. The authorities have also instituted the National Literacy and Numeracy Test for all students completing their teacher education courses from 2017 onwards. Ten percent of students who wrote a trial test in 2016 failed.
7. The special education sector of the various state education departments is overwhelmed with students who are not coping. Students have to wait for months for an assessment to be done. If they are lucky an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) is drawn up with much of the work expected to be done by the parents at home. As a result there is now an army of tutors in the community who are attempting to redress the lack of effective teaching in the classroom. This tuition has to be paid for by the parents. Many families cannot afford the tuition. Of concern as well is the rise of computer generated programs that are expensive and unproven in their educational value.
8. Teaching unions have used their political clout to carve out cosy conditions for teachers, so that eight working days a year are now deemed to be pupil free days. Some schools are now making the last three weeks of the end of the year optional to senior school students. Some students are, therefore, losing nearly five weeks of schooling in a year. This is not the way to restore our international standing in education. We need more time to teach a complex curriculum, not less.
9. The national curriculum is poorly constructed e.g. '*place value*' is to be taught in Year 4 up to 99,999. No further recommendation are then made for thousands and millions. Decimals are to be introduced in Year 4, teaching both tenths and hundredths. Previously hundredths were taught in Year 5 and thousandths in Year 6. Working with

students at this level, many are clearly not ready for the complexities of hundredths at Year 4.

10. The present system ignores milestones in the natural development of children. A Year 1 student is expected to “create a variety of imaginative, informative and persuasive texts including recounts, procedures, performances, literary retellings and poetry.” This is ridiculous!
11. Technology has transformed the lives of many disabled people who previously would not have been able to communicate or learn. However, in mainstream education technology is often embraced without formal research as to the benefits. While the teaching of technology skills is vital, there is a proliferation of programs that are not well constructed and researched. There has also not been enough time to assess the effects of the use of computers on reading and writing skills. Confusion reigns as to when students should move on to computers for writing and mathematics. Many students are involved with social media which is time consuming and can be socially challenging. The whole of society is grappling with these issues.
12. The government spent 4.9% of GDP on education in 2012. By comparison Sweden spent 7.7% and New Zealand 7.3%. In 2014 the federal government spent more than half of the total of the education bill of \$84.57 billion on primary and secondary education. This is not enough in percentage terms and it is, furthermore, often wasted e.g. with the great school building program following the GFC in 2008. There has also been a great waste of money with the Vocational Education and Training (VET) program: fraudulent providers and a lack of guidelines and supervision.
13. Federal and State political systems ‘play politics’ with the education system e.g. ‘The Gonski Report’ and this adds further to the confusion and wastefulness. Education is the third biggest export behind iron ore and coal and generates \$20 billion a year, (more than the \$16 billion tourist industry). It is vital that the government addresses - and fixes - these issues.

These points are expounded upon in more detail as follows:

WHOLE LANGUAGE

The Whole Language Approach was introduced in Australia in the 80's. Many Western countries took it on board: The USA, United Kingdom and New Zealand to name a few. The reasoning was that children learnt their oral language through exposure to the language. Written language should, therefore, be learnt in the same way. It did not need to be taught systematically. Expose the child to written language in all its complexity and the child would learn it without boring tuition and tedious drill.

In fact English is a difficult language to master because of the sound system being irregular in approximately 20% of words and it has a vocabulary greater than any other language. English has a vocabulary approximately twice as large as German. The challenges of learning such a rich language did not deter the promoters of the Whole Language Approach: Stories were presented to students. Work related to grammar, vocabulary and spelling was done only using the words and structures contained in the story. The choice of spelling words or the teaching of a sound depended on the text being presented. There were no graded spelling lists or systematic introduction of the easier phonics before moving on to the more difficult sounds.

The old 'boring' carefully graded readers were thrown out and children were encouraged to look at pictures, using a cueing system related to context and vocabulary. A Year 1 reading book might have a picture of a giraffe allowing the word to be guessed. The children had been liberated! No more boring phonics workbooks. Very quickly phonics was extinguished from the curriculum altogether. The exponents of the Whole Language Approach proclaimed that phonics were far too complex for little children to learn. They stated that the students would pick it up for themselves, or learn to read using contextual and semantic cues. Stories abounded of older teachers locking their doors and teaching phonics in secret. Teachers of children with dyslexia use phonics based programs to overcome the difficulties.

Thirty years on and what do we have? The Bush Administration mandated that if phonics was not taught in a school, it would lose its funding. The United Kingdom, after The Bullock Report, mandated in 2005 that phonics had to be taught. However, much difficulty was encountered by the authorities in getting the teachers to change to the teaching of phonics. New Zealand is still struggling with Whole Language despite academics pointing out in no uncertain terms that the system has failed them, as well as the Reading Recovery Program that was the work of New Zealander, Marie Clay. Many of our children in Australia have been

exposed to Reading Recovery as well. Reading Recovery does not promote the use of phonics and has now been thoroughly researched and shown to be ineffective except with students who are only mildly disabled in reading.

Phonics has now been included in our new National Curriculum. That does not mean the problem has been resolved. Numerous evidence-based academic studies have been done showing that carefully taught **synthetic** phonics (building the reading through blending sounds into words) establishes solid reading foundations, although it takes a little longer than the Whole Language Approach, A comprehension driven approach known as Balanced Reading is now being used in our schools. There is an obsession with the learning of a list of a hundred sight words. They are learnt out of context and are generally the most difficult of the words e.g. who, could, through. The sounds of the letters are taught and used only on the first letter of a word. After establishing the sound at the beginning of the word, the child is encouraged to guess from the context and pictures. Students are told to go back to the beginning of the sentence and try again. The students are not told to look at the word and work it out through the use of phonics or breaking words into syllables. The result of this approach is that the children learn words incorrectly e.g. using the word **stall** when the word is **stable**. Many of the children read slowly because every time a word presents a problem they go back to the beginning of the sentence hoping for inspiration when the problem word is encountered again.

Thirty percent of our children cannot read up to the required standard. It should be about five percent. In countries such as Sweden where the sound system of the language is regular, everyone can read. With our complex sound system and a language imbued with homonyms we need to **TEACH** our children more, not less. The trouble is that after thirty years, the current teachers, who were not taught phonics, do not know the intricacies of the language themselves. Not being taught the sound-symbol relationship of the language has a huge impact on written work. Eighty percent of words are phonically regular and can be sounded out e.g. r-a-n (ran) or b-r-ai-n (brain) or a-c-a-d-e-m-i-c (academic). Currently students are taught to spell all words using the names of letters as in a spelling bee. They do not know that there are word families, which greatly facilitate the learning of spelling. At present each word must be learnt as a sight word. The lack of acquisition of the basics of language in the primary schools is perpetuated in the senior schools and continues to create problems at university level. The result is that we now have many graduates from universities who cannot

spell well or write a decent report. There are many excellent phonics based programs now being marketed but there is great resistance from many teachers and principals to the implementation of these programs in schools.

CONSTRUCTIVISM

Sydney University defines constructivism as follows:

“The theory suggests that humans construct knowledge and meaning from their experiences. The teacher functions more as a facilitator who coaches, mediates, prompts and helps students develop and assess their understanding, and thereby their learning. One of the teacher’s biggest jobs becomes *ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS.*”

Before the introduction of constructivism in our schools, teachers taught students using explicit instruction. This involved a carefully prepared lesson in which students were introduced to the subject for the lesson, given specific instruction, demonstration, eliciting of responses and ideas from students etc. The students were then given written work so that the teacher could establish if the content to be learnt was understood. Further instruction or explanation was given if needed.

A certain amount of drill work was done to embed the learning before the next step in the subject was introduced. The curriculum was carefully graded and teachers did further task analysis of all subjects so that the work was broken up into small graded steps. A student did not move on until the current step had been mastered. This was known as Mastery Learning. Revision was built into the program and this was usually done at the end of the term.

The teachers of today seem to be unaware of The Forgetting Curve - readily available in any VCE Psychology textbook. The curve shows that after 20 minutes, 40% of what has been learnt has been forgotten. After an hour 50% has been forgotten. After 8 hours 65% cannot be recalled. After two days only 30% of the information is retained. This retention slips to 20% after 31 days, *unless* some effort is made to revise the learning.

Constructivism, however, is built on the premise that students cannot be taught. Students construct knowledge and meaning for themselves from their experiences. They need to absorb the knowledge being presented to them when they are ready to do so. This means that the teacher becomes a facilitator, promoting enquiry-based learning, presenting a variety of

experiences, using group activities, peer tutoring and problem solving, so that the student will be motivated and take from the classroom what needs to be learnt. Constructivism means students are involved in many research projects. The students are now responsible for their education, not the teacher. Through this process it is hoped that the student will learn many skills. A lot of the work is done in groups of four. Some students are vocal and capable of organizing the group. Others are, however, less vocal and less motivated. It is possible that progress in these areas will not be achieved as the more passive student is happy to sit back and let the others do the work. The internet is used extensively as a resource and much work is done at home with the help of parents, older siblings and sometimes the parents doing the work themselves so the student can go to bed. The workload can be heavy.

Mathematics is taught in the same fashion. A class may run a shop, or students may have to measure their bedrooms to work out areas and perimeters. A Year 6 student may be involved in a project involving the buying and selling of a house. Many projects are valuable but at no point is the whole project synthesized with the students and the learning objectives reinforced. Asked a few weeks later to explain area and perimeter and the students have forgotten. Ask what the function of the decimal point is and a host of unbelievable responses is elicited. There is nothing wrong with these projects but they should not be the vehicle through which basic skills and concept learning take place. Projects should come after the teaching of concepts and skills so that the learning can be reinforced. The current thinking is that much can be learnt through games. These are time consuming and if they are to be effective, the teacher needs to follow up and check that the learning has taken place. This is not always the case. Many students do not have their number facts at their fingertips by the end of Year Four, despite many games. Students are also presented with a variety of techniques or thinking processes. A current Year Five textbook presents five different ways for working out long multiplication. The student can choose which strategy to use. This is fine for the gifted student who wants to explore. ***It is useless to the student who cannot remember how each process works.*** One process, properly taught, will suffice. Mathematics homework is frequently sent home involving concepts that have not yet been experienced in the classroom. This puts the onus on the parents to do the teaching.

Sadly constructivism has failed our students. All methods of assessment, both national and international, confirm this. Australian students have been short changed. Their learning should be carefully planned and executed as in explicit instruction with follow up exercises

and revision so that they gain mastery over the subject matter and the core skills of reading, writing and mathematics. There is a place for constructivism but it should be limited. Some students benefit from the teamwork. Many students are also very articulate because of the talking involved in the group work and also because of the emphasis on public speaking as results of the enquiry approach are presented to the other students and teachers.

THE SELF-ESTEEM MOVEMENT

The self-esteem movement permeates all facets of education. It can be traced back to American psychologist, Stanley Coopersmith. In 1967 he proposed that self-esteem was crucial for child rearing. He did some research, which was taken up by other psychologists who put a greater emphasis on the notions of 'feeling good' and 'doing well'. Eventually the maxim became that learning could not take place unless a person had high self-esteem. Martin Seligman debunks this in his book *The Optimistic Child*. However, the myth continues. No child can have their self-esteem damaged, as their learning will be affected. Students are told that everything they do is good. Some teachers do not even tell a child that their spelling of a word is wrong, for fear of irreparably damaging the child. The teachers simply tick those letters that are correct. The result is that students have no standard to work to or strive for.

A young graduate student in her first job was asked to write an article for distribution to clients. The boss said that her work was not up to scratch, as it was full of spelling and grammatical errors. She burst into tears and said that no one had ever told her before that her work was not good enough. She is no longer employed by the firm.

Outside of school some children's parties shield the partygoers from losing when playing 'pass the parcel' by putting a prize in each layer/box. That way nobody is 'damaged' by losing. This is not an ideal way to train a child for the hard knocks of life. Resilience needs to be inculcated in children from an early age at home and in school. Self-esteem is built by facing challenges honestly and with guidance from parents and teachers, working out strategies for overcoming difficulties and thereby gradually achieving goals.

CORRUPT REPORTING SYSTEMS

With the introduction of **Whole Language** and **Constructivism** came a new reporting system. Gone were the old fashioned marks for each subject with a class and grade average so that

parents could assess where their child was performing in relation to the other students in the class. Instead of norm based assessment where students were assessed against the performance of other students, criterion referenced assessment was introduced. A list of objectives (criteria) in education was compiled. Students were assessed, mainly through observation of the teacher, as to whether the student was achieving these objectives. A rating was then given.

An A meant the student was advanced. An E meant the student had established the concept. C indicated that the student was consolidating and a B meant the student was beginning to develop the concept or skill. Some schools are still using this system of reporting known as the Criteria Scale. Other schools have returned to the conventional use of A, B, C and D.

Some schools are providing an additional '*comparative report*'. This compares all students across that particular grade. They are awarded scores of A, B, C, D and E in each subject. The number of students in each level in that grade is documented. The grades relevant to the individual child's report are underlined. Parents can see at a glance how their child is performing in comparison to the other students in the grade. An actual report showed:

"English-writing. 47 students attained a C and the C was underlined. 23 attained a B and 1 student was awarded an A. There were 77 students at that grade level in that subject and no D or E was given."

One has to wonder at the validity of the system with all students in basically two groups.

In many primary schools no student receives a rating *less than six months behind the expected level or more than six months ahead of the expected level*. When assessed on norm based testing these students can, in reality, be one to three years behind or ahead of the norm for their age.

Teachers are instructed not to make ANY comments on the reports that are not positive, as the child's self-esteem may be damaged. For example a child who cannot read well and may be the worst in the class might (only) receive a comment that their comprehension has improved. Parents are, therefore, unaware their child is struggling. The result of this deception is that over the years the parents have become accustomed to positive 'feel good' reports so when verbally informed that some aspect of their child's work is problematic, some parents become aggressive and blame (and confront) the teacher. Teachers are disinclined to

report problems to parents so as to avoid confrontation. This **reporting system** has created the expectation that every report will be positive and good. If parents - through NAPLAN testing - learn that their child is underperforming, there is a tendency by some schools to downplay the result as a 'one-off'. Furthermore, in most schools, any attempt at obtaining in depth information from a teacher at a parent interview, is thwarted, because the child comes to the interview as well to discuss and display his/her portfolio. No difficult 'damaging' issues can be pursued in front of the child.

Spelling no longer appears as a separate subject on a report as it has been subsumed into writing. Similarly, no comment is made on the child's ability to decode words i.e. read after Year 2. All comments relate to the child's ability in comprehension. As reading decoding is not a heading on a report, teachers are not obliged to make a comment or award a rating. Weak areas are hinted at under the heading 'Things the student needs to focus on.' Reports do not tell the truth and parents are constantly misled because of the ridiculous notion that the child's self-esteem will be damaged.

Students often infer their ranking relative to their peers. Teachers know who is not performing but parents are often oblivious to the truth.

UNIVERSITIES

The Australian universities have much to answer for. Some are doing excellent research into the learning process and the difficulties encountered by students with learning disabilities. Some educational faculties at the universities are producing accessible new tests, information and programs. The philosophy of constructivism was introduced into the universities as well. University students are expected to gain much of their knowledge through group work and research on particular topics. One retired professor from a faculty of medicine deems it to be a most inefficient and time wasting method of transferring a vast bank of knowledge to students in a limited time frame. In education, the academics who introduced the Whole Language Approach and Constructivism into the school curriculum have dominated the educational scene for thirty years with uncompromising 'religious' type fervor. They indoctrinated three generations of teachers with their beliefs. Direct teaching was deemed to be 'evil' and student teachers were not given any education on alternatives for teaching and learning.

The subjects presented to student teachers are poorly designed and ensure that new teachers are delivered to the education system ill-equipped to teach and with little knowledge of how to teach effectively. The student teachers were not even given a term's instruction on the basics of learning difficulties. Last year for the **first** time, teachers have to do a course on special education for their professional development and student teachers now have to do a course as part of their training at university. Many of the present teachers, having been imbued with the current doctrines, are very resistant to change. Research paper after research paper shows that their knowledge of phonics and alternative ways of teaching reading are not sufficient to teach children adequately. Many teachers are also not proficient in teaching mathematics. Apart from preparing student teachers poorly, universities have allowed people with degrees in other disciplines to take up teaching. After a one-year course they are deemed to be adequately trained. Some of these teachers with, perhaps a science degree, have found themselves in a Year 2 class teaching reading. They would have been lucky if they had a few lectures on the subject of reading, let alone any understanding of the reading process and all its intricacies at this level.

SELECTION OF STUDENT TEACHERS

Perhaps the universities' greatest failing has been the selection of students for teaching. An ATAR score of 99.9 is required to get into medicine. A score of 92 is needed for occupational therapy. A score over 50 is required for teaching. Last year, after all that has been said about raising teacher standards and entry levels to the universities, a student was admitted with an ATAR score of 49. As the CEO of ACER (The Australian Council of Educational Research), Geoff Masters, said at a recent seminar, high achieving countries such as Finland, South Korea and Singapore take their student teachers from the top 30% of students. Australia takes its students teachers from the bottom 70%. Many students teachers, who have missed out on their first and second preferences, fall back on teaching, but not because they have any passion or dedication for the profession. One of the most disturbing factors is that within five years of their training being completed, nearly 50% of graduates have left the teaching profession disillusioned and complaining about excessive workloads and long hours, lack of control over classroom curriculum, unsupportive staff rooms and lack of recognition. What an amazing indictment on the profession and what an enormous cost to the nation economically

and educationally. The government has, however, made a start on addressing the problem of low ATAR scores.

SPECIAL EDUCATION

Thirty years ago students with special needs generally went to special schools set up to cater for their specific problems. After much campaigning by parents of special needs students, these students were absorbed into the mainstream school system. No training was given to the classroom teachers. Many of these teachers were also experiencing an increase in numbers of immigrant children, some traumatized and many with no English. Added to the teachers' load is now another 30% of the school population who are underachieving. Approximately 5-8% of these students will have learning difficulties such as dyslexia, auditory processing problems, speech and language disorders, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, emotional and behavioural problems. What special education department can cope with such a load?

Furthermore, the Whole Language enthusiasts insisted that any remedial work was to be done in the classroom and more of the same was delivered to the child who was struggling. Some children with reading problems in the lower grades are withdrawn on a daily basis and given instruction known as Reading Recovery. Proper evaluations of this system now indicate that only students with mild difficulties benefit. The bulk of the students make no lasting gains.

It is no wonder that the educational system is now supported by an army of tutors- both trained and untrained. Like everything else, education has been outsourced! Students' busy afternoons and evenings are filled with tutors trying to fill in all the gaps in their students' education between the sporting activities, dance, acting, ballet and music lessons. The students of today have, as a result, very little unstructured free time. Parents have to pay for this extra tuition. Many parents are already spending large sums of money on private school education. Other parents simply cannot afford the time or the money to supplement their children's education with tutoring. Over thirty percent of the school population continues to struggle and never reaches its full potential at school.

UNIONS

The school year is usually made up of forty weeks of teaching and twelve weeks of holidays. Over the years that teaching time has been eroded. Teachers are now allowed eight pupil free days a year. In Victoria, five of these days are specifically mandated by the Victorian Government. The other three days may be taken at any time of a school's choosing. The result is that many of these pupil free days are Fridays or Mondays so students have numerous long weekends. On the Melbourne Cup weekend students are frequently given the Monday off, or students are given the option of going to school or not. Pupil-free days involve working parents in much rearranging of schedules, which often impact on grandparents as well. Furthermore, an environment is created where the approach to learning appears to be casual or optional, so that students and parents then opt out of going to school for a variety of reasons that have little to do with ill health. Children take days off for birthdays, 'mental health' days and are even taken out of school for family holidays during term time. The pupil free days are used by teachers for report writing, curriculum days, professional development and parent interviews. These pupil free days have effectively cut teaching time for students from forty weeks to thirty-eight weeks a year. The teaching profession enjoys twelve weeks holiday a year. No other profession is so blessed. There is less time now than ever before to teach, while the actual curriculum to be taught has greatly increased. Some schools are seeking to counteract this loss of teaching time by starting the next year's curriculum, once end of year testing and exams are completed. This is called 'extended learning' and several independent senior schools in Victoria are using the last three weeks of the year in this way. In contrast many of the government senior schools in Victoria have made the last three weeks of schooling 'optional'. This means that a student does not have to come to school. In one school, the formal timetable was discontinued on the 25th of November - 18 teaching days were lost as a result. These students had their 40 week year reduced to 35 weeks. If the students did choose to come to school, the curriculum involved activities such as sport, cooking and cheerleading. In some cases the program had to be paid for by the parents. All the teachers were at school but only a few were involved in the optional activities. In other schools, these last two/three weeks of the year are mandatory for students to attend, but the time is frequently wasted with students watching videos and playing games in both independent and government schools. Kris Kringle days feature prominently in some of these schools!

In Victoria, a teacher taking maternity leave has her position held for her for the next seven years. She does not need to inform her principal about her possible return to teaching until the November of the year before her return. By this stage teachers and graduate students have already been awarded placements and the principal has to take whatever teacher is then available.

In primary schools many classes are composite classes e.g. a combined Year 3/4. There is no evidence available to prove this is beneficial, and furthermore, the teacher has to do double the amount of preparation. To what end? On the other hand shared class teaching has gradually evolved where a class is shared between two teachers e.g. Teacher One teaches Monday and Tuesday and Teacher Two, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. This is great for a teacher with small children at home. It is less than ideal for the students in the class. Over the years the teachers' unions have fought for smaller class sizes, citing large classes to be detrimental to students' progress. They have then ironically introduced the open plan classrooms where two or three classes share the same large space creating noise and distraction factors making it almost impossible for some children to learn. There is no evidence to support the benefits of open plan classrooms. Larger classes would save money, which could be invested in other areas of education, particularly if the constructivist approach was replaced with explicit direct teaching.

The teachers' unions have served their teachers well to the detriment of the students that they teach.

NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The much-lauded National Curriculum was brought in nationally in January 2012. Some changes of significance were made. In Language, phonics was to be taught and grammar was back on the agenda. However, while phonics was documented in the curriculum, clear guidelines were not given. Diphthongs were not mentioned and there was no direction on how the phonics that were documented were to be introduced and taught. While a form of phonics is now taught in language, the students do not develop any sounding out principles. Words are spelt using letter names. There is an emphasis on sight words and decoding text using comprehension skills. In written text, students still struggle with capitals and full stops in sentence construction, tenses are muddled and stories are written in the first person to the detriment of any other form. The grammar that is to be taught is often inappropriate for the

level of development of the students e.g. “Understand that a clause is a unit of grammar usually containing a subject and a verb and that these need to be in agreement.” Year 3!

In mathematics oddities also occur in the curriculum. The 4x table was taken out of the Year 3 curriculum and was to be taught in Year 4. (Most students find the 3x table more difficult than the 4x table.) Place value disappeared after Year Four. Decimals were to be introduced in Year 4 with tenths and possibly hundredths. No further mention was made of thousandths. In fractions, tenths are never mentioned as a fraction yet fifths are introduced in Year 4. Formal algebra was to be introduced in Year 6 instead of Year 7. In the primary area, schools and textbooks have made the best of the curriculum they have been given e.g. teaching place value as it always had been taught with millions being introduced at Year 6 level. In other cases there appear to be trends developing which are inappropriate, such as decimals, fractions and percentages being linked from Year 3 onwards. Long multiplication is being done in some cases at the beginning of Year 4. In other schools, Years 3/4 are not taught the vertical format of the four processes, but instead students are given a variety of ‘strategies’ to use. The result is that many students have no idea how to do the four processes until some time in Year 4/5. In fact it would appear that there is a de-emphasis on the number area of the curriculum.

DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

One of my concerns is about the mismatch between the National Curriculum and the well researched body of evidence on developmental milestones in children’s learning.

Thirty years ago teachers were well aware of the developmental levels of the primary school students that they taught. In the teaching of written language it was accepted that phonics was systematically introduced in Prep and Year 1. This coincided with Level 3 of the acquisition of written language, ‘the phonetic stage’. The consolidation of these phonic skills which involved systematic detailed teaching of all aspects of phonics and related skills, culminated usually in Year 1/2 students (5-7 years of age) writing stories using the sound structures that they had learnt. Sometimes a word was created that did not exist. The text was, however, always readable, as a suitable sound had been substituted while silent letters were ignored. The children could ‘sound out’ and understood the alphabetic principle of the language. This stage was followed in late Year 1 or early Year 2 with Level Four known as the

'transitional spelling stage'. Gradually, as the year progressed the students began to notice that some words were very strange and that 'thay', for example, was in fact spelt as they. By the end of the year, the reading and writing that these students produced indicated that they had, on the whole, mastered the phonics of the language and were moving into the fourth or transitional stage of language acquisition - the spelling of words correctly and the gradual mastery of morphemes, compound words, contractions and homonyms. The heavy reliance on the auditory components of the words made way for a visual representation of the words. The students were now capable of spelling out the letters in words. Years 3 and 4 were spent exploring the writing of stories culminating often in Year 5 with long intricate stories and in most cases significant mastery of written language skills. The students now entered the fifth and final stage of acquisition of written language skills, namely the independence stage. Along the way students were introduced to the writing of nonfiction in projects. Skills related to the writing of nonfiction were built up gradually over the years, starting with simple research at Year 3 level with short written presentations.

This developmental process of language acquisition has been well researched and documented. Westwood provides a comprehensive model for the spelling skills described above. His model includes five stages and is based on work by Bissex, Gentry, Moats and Zutell. Other researchers and theorists such as Chall, have identified similar developmental stages of reading acquisition. Ehri also provides a flexible framework for educators to use. All these models, whether for reading or spelling, have identified an early phonics approach, the systematic teaching of phonics, the gradual mastery of the intricacies of the language and finally a greater automatic focus on the visual aspects of language. The introduction of the Whole Language Approach denied students access to the essential early learning skills for developing efficient reading and writing. The result was that a third of our students do not read effectively. Despite Whole Language now being discredited and phonics having been included in the curriculum, old habits die hard. Children are still not encouraged to sound out words. They are forced into the visual format almost immediately using the cueing systems. There is a heavy emphasis on the learning of sight words and the spelling out of words using letter names. Many students never understand the alphabetic principle of the language. It sometimes takes many remedial lessons for a child to make a direct association between a sound and its written form. The child who only spells the letters in words, when being instructed in phonics, says the sound of the letter, then the name of the letter and only then writes the letter. The association of the sound of the letter with the ability to write it

directly can take a long time to be established automatically, because of the extensive use of letter names. The steady progression through the various auditory phases leading into the greater reliance on the visual form and final mastery of reading and writing has been sabotaged at the sounding out stage.

Unfortunately, in an attempt to stop teachers teaching students prescribed stories that could be adapted to any given story topic in NAPLAN, persuasive text was introduced instead of story writing. What a disaster. The lower grades are forced into this format while still acquiring mastery of the English language. Writing creativity and imagination are stifled. Furthermore, the language objectives do not coincide with the natural language development in children. A considerable amount of work has been done on researching the development of writing in children. Kroll is one of the foremost researchers in this area. He proposes that there are four phases:

*The Preparatory Phase (approximately ages 4-7) Basic motor skills are developed and many aspects of the spelling system acquired.

*Consolidation Stage (approximately ages 7-9) Children begin to use writing to reflect what they say in speech. Children's spoken language skills help to improve their writing. They may use unfinished sentences and strings of clauses linked with the conjunction and.

*Differentiation Phase (approximately age 9 onwards) It is at this stage that children *begin* to learn that written language differs from oral language in style and structure. They begin to realise that different kinds of writing are required for different purposes and audiences. Writing now becomes more formal than the spoken language. Children begin to understand that writing serves a purpose.

*Integration Phase (approximately 14 onwards) Writers now have a good command of the written word. They have a variety of stylistic choices and students understand that writing and speech have different forms and functions, but are still linked in many ways.

The current language objectives listed at a Melbourne school for Year 2 are:

Semester 1. Uses question and exclamation marks correctly. Begins to use synonyms and antonyms to improve writing.

Semester 2. Begins to use commas and attempts to use apostrophes of possession. Uses vocabulary appropriate to text type and purpose e.g. persuasive and descriptive or specific vocabulary.

By Semester 2 of Year 2 the student is expected to present “two relevant examples to support an argument. (Most Year 2 students do not have *formal* persuasive language in their oral speech!)

The above objectives are being introduced into the curriculum far too early, especially as all the children will not be at the same stages of development and very few will be advanced enough to cope with the formal prescribed format of persuasive writing. Using Kroll’s research as a guideline in the school setting, persuasive text should not be introduced until Year 4 or 5 depending on the child’s stage of development.

Similar inappropriate work is presented in mathematics. The new National Curriculum has introduced algebra into primary school mathematics. Recently the *second* best group in a Year 6 maths class was given algebra equations to solve which included negative numbers and x on both sides of the equal sign. Most students are in Year 8/9 before these types of equations are done.

Piaget maintained that students generally came to the end of the concrete operational level at about the age of eleven or twelve. Subsequent research indicates that some students may stay in the concrete operational area until thirteen or fourteen and will need hands on concrete teaching into senior school. Some Year 6 students, therefore, may be ready for algebra but many are not and they are certainly not ready for Year 9 mathematics. Neither does it seem advisable to be introducing algebraic concepts at Year 4 level where few students even have a real concept of equal.

The mismatch between children’s developmental levels and the current curriculum has contributed significantly to the difficulties that many children encounter in our schools. Other mismatches occur. The problem needs to be addressed.

TECHNOLOGY

Technology has been fervently embraced in many of the schools despite the fact that little research has been done into the effectiveness of the technology in students’ learning. All

students need to learn the many skills involved in present day technology in order to be an integral part of our technological world. Schools are ideally placed to deliver this mandate. Many questions, however, need to be answered. At which stage should technology be introduced? Should reading, writing and mathematics be established first using traditional methods? There are questions related to typing skills and handwriting skills. There are also question marks over the quality of many programs presented on computers e.g. comprehension programs, mathematics programs. Great strides have been made in the production of programs for those with physical and/or learning difficulties. Learning has become much more accessible for these students and in fact in many cases has changed their lives. Over the last couple of years teachers have embraced technology as a way of communicating with their students - emails to remind them to hand in work on the dates specified and homework to be done. This is being done at the primary level as well.

There has been an explosion of programs based on the latest research and brain plasticity. Programs such as FastForward maintain that changes in the brain can be made that facilitate learning. Much time and money is spent on this both by some schools and by many parents. Some long-term studies have been done or are being done. As yet the jury is out, but generally the consensus is that while short-term gains are made, they tend to dissipate and after two/three years the participants are no better off than their counterparts who did not undergo the training.

The dark side of the revolution in technology is the addiction to games on screen, the amount of time spent online, the cyber bullying, the stress, depression and the anxiety the new culture is creating. Also of concern is the access to pornography and sexting. In some cases, senior students are already utilizing their entrepreneurial skills and running businesses while still at school. While this is exciting, it also provides challenges for teachers and parents. Indeed, our whole society is under threat as people spend more time engaging in social media activities rather than face-to-face interaction. There is much to celebrate in the new technology. There is, however, also much of great concern, requiring teachers and parents to be ever vigilant, to be pro-active and to work together with students to maximize the positive aspects and to minimize the harmful pitfalls of technology.

FUNDING

Money, or the lack thereof, is a perennial problem in education. Government is responsible for early learners' education, primary and secondary education and the universities as well as vocational training. Government needs to supply the buildings and facilities necessary for the process of education. Teachers need to be trained and paid. Assessment procedures need to be trialed and implemented. Immigrant students need to be taught English. Special departments/schools need to be set up for students with physical and mental impairments. The National Curriculum needs to be refined. Research needs to be ongoing and implemented.

The educational budget is huge but the money is not always spent wisely and there is frequently gross mismanagement and waste. Enquiries take place and are funded by the government e.g. the 2005 enquiry undertaken by a team of educators concerned about the poor standard of reading in Australia. This team spent six months touring the country and produced a document known as the Nelson Report. The main findings of the report were that student teachers in training were very poorly prepared to teach reading. The report also found that many of the students undertaking the courses in teaching had poor literacy skills themselves. Beginning primary teachers were not confident about their ability to teach literacy skills and only a third of the senior staff in schools thought that the new teachers had been adequately trained.

Unfortunately, Brendan Nelson, who was Minister of Education at the time, and who had commissioned the document, was moved to the Ministry of Defence. Julie Bishop took over the role of Education Minister for a short time. Her response to this damning indictment of the training and skill of new teachers was to commission the production of a kit that could be used to teach underachieving readers. It was a very poor attempt at phonics instruction. There were ten lessons. It was introduced with much fanfare and disappeared within a year. It cost the taxpayer thirty million dollars and bore no relation to the report that was supposed to have generated it. The excellent recommendations made in the report lie on a shelf in Canberra gathering dust.

It is twelve years since that report was produced. Nothing has changed. Much needs to be done. Universities need to implement thoroughly researched methods of teaching reading. Student selection needs a dramatic overhaul. However, our greatest need is to change the

philosophy of education from Whole Language and Constructivism to explicit teaching and evidence based methods of teaching reading. The retraining of teachers needs also to be undertaken.

POLITICAL SYSTEM

Politics has long used education as a political football and both of the major parties are guilty of this. Is it necessary to mention the Gonski Report? The country's most urgent need at present is budget repair. Education is inextricably linked with budget repair. It is estimated, according to the report from the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), that 44% of Australians, at this point in time, do not have sufficient language and mathematics skills for daily living. Is this the clever country? The program *Reading Between the Lines* on SBS in September 2016 highlighted the enormous disadvantages of not having adequate reading skills. Lack of reading skills almost inevitably results in no employment, which forces non-readers onto welfare, a possible life of crime to survive, and more inmates for our already overcrowded prisons. Inability to read efficiently generates social problems, health and medical difficulties, exploitation by others and generally lives that are severely blighted by the disability. The inequality between the rich and the poor is further exacerbated and the fabric of society is most certainly threatened. Can Australia afford to support this huge unskilled population? Can Australia afford to handle all the social and medical problems that will escalate? Is there no man or woman in Australia or a group of like-minded, concerned people, who will stand up and *CHANGE* the education in this country to the benefit of all Australians? Probably *NOT* given the present parlous state of our political system.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

- The blame game needs to stop. The war between Whole Language and Phonics has been long and bitter - *TOO* long. We have lost three generations of students to mediocrity and in many cases failure and hopelessness. We are busy losing another generation *NOW*. The Whole Language proponents need to concede that the experiment has been a failure!
- Equally as bitter has been the war between constructivism and explicit instruction. Constructivism has its place but only as the 'cherry on the top' when all other aspects

of the learning have been *TAUGHT* using explicit instruction. This means, clear objectives for each lesson, lessons broken into hierarchical steps, written exercises, immediate feedback, re-teaching where necessary and constant revision of the skills learnt.

- Hiding behind the self-esteem movement has to stop. This does not mean that praise is not given. Children with learning difficulties and children who have lost their way because of inappropriate tuition, have lost their self-confidence. A good teacher breaks down tasks into manageable units so that the student succeeds and self esteem and confidence are gradually built up. There is no quick fix to the restoration of self-esteem. However, praise that is honest goes a long way to helping. The casual and unjustified handing out of praise and rewards undermines the whole system, so that when students are praised for something truly well done, they do not believe the praise that is given.
- Teachers and parents need to honestly discuss the strengths and weaknesses of students. This can only be done if valid marks are presented to parents with class averages or a similar system of evaluation that is transparent. With careful explicit teaching and a good grounding in phonics in the lower grades, many of the present day problems will not be present in a well structured education system.
- The retraining of teachers is crucial to improving our education system . It is *NOT* the fault of the teachers that they were so poorly trained and indoctrinated while at university. The teachers need to be supported and treated fairly. Their current salary range is from about \$59,000 to about \$98,000 for a leading teacher. If we want the best teachers, this needs to be looked at as well as an honest appraisal of the benefits awarded to teachers in relation to their twelve weeks holiday a year, their ability to teach larger classes using the direct/explicit approach and the possibility of a trade off in higher salaries.
- Along with proper phonics instruction, decodable books need to be introduced in the lower grades. There are many programs already available.
- The National Curriculum needs to be in alignment with the developmental milestones of children.

- Our student teachers need to come from the top 30% of students not the bottom 70%. It is encouraging that some action is being taken in this area already.
- The teacher training at universities needs to be revamped with an emphasis on properly researched techniques and programs.
- There needs to be an honest assessment of the actual time that students spend learning in the classroom both at primary and secondary levels. Good teaching requires rigorous programmes with a sense of purpose.

WHO CAN HELP IMPLEMENT THIS?

- **Most Parents:** They are sick of the current inefficiencies of the education system and very skeptical of the reporting system. They would support sensible changes.
- **Teachers:** There are teachers now, who are researching and looking for more effective ways of teaching their students. After all, the Whole Language Approach was welcomed, initially, by most teachers, as it was a new and exciting way of teaching. The program was brought in with a minimum of fuss. It was a couple of years later that the doctrine became more defined, throwing out phonics and dismissing all ideas that were not Whole Language. Journals such as the Australian Journal of Reading became dogmatic and scathing of learning problems maintaining that Whole Language was the panacea for all ills. Teachers are very capable of driving change. As a result they may be more fulfilled in their profession, so that the huge loss of teachers to the profession may be slowed.
- **Schools:** There are schools that have already made the necessary changes and the results indicate great progress. These changes have been brought about by dedicated principals, observing the inefficiencies of the current teaching methods and introducing new models and seeking out staff who are willing to be retrained.
- **Universities:** There are many academics researching methods of teaching and the teaching of reading. Programs have been put together and in many cases are being used in schools already.
- **Education Departments:** These institutions are the key to consistent overall change.

- **Educational Professionals:** Many professionals such as psychologists and language therapists are assisting children who have been caught in the present inefficient ways of teaching. There are also trained and accredited tutors such as the tutors at Learning Difficulties Australia.

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Testimonials by Parents:

Name: Fiona Zapantis

I can concur with Ms Deyzel's points highlighted in this article.

My daughter lacked the basic language skills that were glossed over by her school. The phonics were never embedded and as a result my child struggled to read and write. The current school curriculum and teaching methods were failing her.

Without 1:1 direct instruction via an external Special Education Tutor, who taught a phonics program, my child would not be able to read, spell or write today. All these skills are a necessity for adult life.

Current teaching methods need to be reviewed. Reports need to be accurate and truthful , otherwise the whole system will continue to fail our children.

Ms Deyzel has a proven track record that her teaching program works, so that with the correct teaching methods language disorders and difficulties can be improved and in most cases eliminated.

Name: D.C.

"I have 2 children who see Jenny weekly. One for maths another for literacy. They both go to private schools.

My maths child approached me in year 2 and said she 'didn't get maths'. I approached the teacher at the time who reassured me 'all was fine.' After my child's persistent complaining I approached the teacher again who made me feel as though I was insulting her so I no longer felt comfortable approaching her after that.

I then decided to contact Jenny whom I had been introduced to by another parent. A comprehensive assessment was undertaken during the school holidays only to discover my child's feelings were a reality. I was shocked, disappointed and lost faith in the school system. The results were there right in front of my eyes. The computations, the assessments, the scores, the workings, everything I don't get to see from the school.

It is difficult for me to read the school's reports and have faith that the report actually reflects my child's performance. When you meet with your child's teacher and only have 10 minutes at the very beginning of the year and 20 minutes in the middle of the year it is difficult to for me to say that we actually do really know what's going on.

I meet with Jenny 4 times per year at the conclusion of each school term and she allocates 1 hour aside per child. She shows me all their workings for the term, their testing, their results, what their strengths are and what they need to improve on.

I now rely on Jenny's reports instead of the school's reports to give me a true indication of where my children are at. If the school's report matched Jenny's reports then I probably would have more faith in believing the school report.

On a positive note my child has been thriving over the past 4 years with Jenny's guidance and has since changed schools. Jenny and I have both noted that my child continues to thrive at her new school and the current school does in fact match up with Jenny's reporting so now I can sleep well.

Name: L.S. (Mother)

It was not until Year 8, when my son attended tutoring sessions after school with Jenny Deyzel, that he became an effective speller.

To quote my son

“Jenny gave me the foundations to spell.”

Jenny had the most profound impact on my dyslexic daughter's life.

Jenny taught my daughter how to spell and read using her phonics program tailored to my daughter's need.

To quote my daughter:

“I had four years of intensive training with Jenny.

I would not have been able to finish high school or take my Year 12 exams without Jenny's teaching.”

Name: G.L.

I have 3 children who were educated with the whole language approach. During their lower primary years, I believed they were falling behind in English. I had all 3 assessed and was not surprised to hear they were already behind at least 2/3 years.

I was fortunate enough to be able to find an incredible remedial tutor who taught all 3 children phonics.

They responded incredibly well under the guidance of this tutor. I believe if it had not been for the teaching of phonics they would not have finished Year 12 with such incredible marks ranging from 95 to high 99.

The importance of teaching phonics to children cannot be understated. Children need to be taught how to decode and have a more structured learning environment which does not happen in the educational system today.

Name: L.B.

The lack of honesty and information sharing within the primary school system is daunting and embarrassing.

It was obvious to us that our son was struggling, but no-one listened to our concerns when we verbalized them to various teachers at our school.

He was found to be dyslexic (after WE initiated an educational assessment) and thankfully found Jenny who with a phonics teaching program and structured teaching of spelling and maths changed my son's perception and ability to learn.

Jenny and her teaching methods were a lifesaver and my son is a testament to her vast knowledge and experience.

Name: Elissa Fiddian

In 2009 after significant frustration with the educational system I sought the educational services of Jenny Deyzel for my eldest daughter. This was following years of school reports stating my daughter was above the educational level of her peers, but she could not spell and had significant difficulty with maths. None of this was attributed to a learning difficulty but to really poor classroom teaching. She would relate her classroom experience to me with frustration. I regularly assisted in the classroom and observed the teacher handing out worksheets but never actually standing at the white board teaching the class as a whole. The students would play word board games such as "boggle" which was very challenging, if you had no idea how to spell. Maths was taught in small groups of four students. If you failed to grasp

the concept of the day you would be left behind and subsequently never given an opportunity to build the steps of acquiring the necessary maths skills.

Since engaging Jenny's services my three children have overwhelmingly flourished. Their results have significantly improved. I totally support her teaching methods, ideologies, systems and processes that she implements to get results! This is reflected in all students she regularly teaches, especially my children, whose educational outcomes are now of a high standard.

Name: Sally E.

My son was in Grade 2 when I realised he had difficulties learning in the classroom. After an assessment with an independent educational psychologist it was confirmed that he had acquired no number facts and his reading was at a pre-Prep level. Alarm bells rang and we sought help from Jenny Deyzel who came highly recommended from another family. I could see that my son was developing 'class clown' behaviours due to his inability to learn in the classroom. The school was unable to adequately meet my son's needs.

Jenny started from scratch with Tom and he began to make gains responding very well to phonics which gave him the literacy building blocks. In a similar way Jenny's approach to numbers, emphasising the basics, and instilling the times tables with repetition and constant revision was a turning point. My son responded very well to direct teaching. He was with Jenny from half way through Year 2 to Year 8. He has gone on to gain a degree at RMIT. I am sure this would not have been the case without intervention. We were lucky to be able to give my son this chance, but I have often wondered about the children who 'miss out' at school and whose parents are not in a financial position to garner external assistance. My son does not have a diagnosed learning difficulty. He failed to learn in the classroom. We will be eternally grateful to Jenny for her wisdom and her skilled teaching.

Name: S.T.

As a parent who doesn't have a profession in education, I find it difficult to know what my children should be learning in literacy and maths and how they are progressing. I am reliant on the school reports and teacher feedback. We are very happy with our children's primary school, who let us know there was a need for extra support via Independent Learning Plan(s). It wasn't until I sought further advice, I found that there were some fundamental gaps in

counting and phonics. My children have very excellent class behaviour and do not have learning difficulties, and we back-up education at home with reading and maths activities. I was surprised that my children are not picking up some of these fundamentals in these early years, which would only become more problematic in future years. Without an intimate knowledge of the curriculum, I'm lost to know what specific maths and literacy activities we should do at home and at what time of the year to complement the school system with activities at home. Why is it so hard to navigate through the education system to ensure children have the fundamentals covered?

Name: Adam T.

Jenny Deyzel's report is written with the insight of a professional having a lifetime's experience in helping children to read and to begin their mathematics. Her practice has grown to full capacity despite of, or because of, the various government, academic educator and school initiatives over recent years, and the anger she feels is palpable.

Her practice is in an extremely affluent suburb and the fact that so many of her pupils come from both elite private and elite state schools demonstrates that:

*no matter how wealthy and educated the family, there will be children with learning difficulties.

*schools do not cope well, or at all, with those children, to the extent of refusing to recognise problems.

*all pupils are let down by the prevailing teaching ideologies, whose proponents, in the spirit of the times, resist evidence-based assessment of their efficacy.

It must be desperate for teachers who want to succeed, but are armed with poor tools and, no matter how they try, watch Australia's ranking fall.

In my own three children's case, two would succeed no matter what teaching method was used. The other, who incidentally score highest of the three in testing, was completely incapable of reading, but we were advised he would eventually learn. Einstein is reputed to have said that repeating something which doesn't work is a symptom of madness - would a few more years of whole word have helped after four years of failure? It took two years of Jenny's concentrated, specialised teaching to bring him to a level where he could continue

independently. The child obtained a first class honours degree with final year projects assessed as being of professional quality, and he now also speaks passable Swedish.

His story illustrates a number of problems parents face:

*how can one obtain a diagnosis of a learning problem, when the school denies there is one?

*given the diagnosis, how can one find an appropriately skilled teacher?

*can a family with young children afford special tuition?